

STATEMENT FOR
THE RECORD BY
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VETERANS EDUCATION PROGRAM SPECIALIST
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE APPROVING AGENCY
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Herseth Sandlin, Ranking Member Boozman and members of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, I am pleased to appear before you today on behalf of the South Dakota State Approving Agency to discuss the functions of State Approving Agencies and the value these agencies have for those eligible for VA educational benefits in South Dakota.

BACKGROUND

Sixty years ago Congress, determined that each State should create an agency to approve the programs within its borders and to determine in which programs it was appropriate for Veterans to enroll, in order for them to utilize their VA educational benefits. The first State Approving Agencies (SAA) were formed for Veterans after World War II. Each State has one and a few states have two or three. One agency would approve all school programs, another agency would approve all on-the-job training programs, and then possibly a third agency would approve the flight schools. Our state approves all programs for those wishing to utilize their VA educational benefits.

After a few years States realized that a National Association was needed and in 1948 the National Association of State Approving Agencies (NASAA) was formed. The National Association assisted states in coordinating their efforts to do a better job for our nation's Veterans. Also it was a tool to resolve mutual problems that were affecting our members.

One of the keys to the success of this association has been the use of technology. Our association created a viable internet web site for the utilization of our association, our service partners and our customer "The American Veteran". Capabilities include: directories for State Approving Agencies and State Veterans Affairs Offices, legislative updates, State and Federal regulatory information, and veteran-related career, educational, and benefit information. Our site is being re-designed and should be completed by the end of this month. The redesign will bring many new enhancements which will further improve communication between our members and the Veterans we serve. South Dakota has been the webmaster for this site since it's creation in 1998.

Our website also has a section exclusively for our members. This members' section includes: directories for our membership and other service partners, presidential updates/briefings, committee updates, association projects, calendar of upcoming events, samples of work processes for training programs (over 1000), national training curriculum, outreach materials and online quarterly reporting system. Members can also send e-mail to other members and post information through the NASAA bulletin board.

ROLE OF STATE APPROVING AGENCIES

In many ways the fundamental role of state approving agencies is the same today, as it was when they were founded. As state entities acting on behalf of the Federal Government, the SAA's have been an outstanding example of the workability of the State-Federal partnership, allowing Federal interests to be pursued at the local level while preserving the identity, interests and sovereignty of States' Rights in education.

PROGRAM APPROVAL

The primary responsibility and focus of the SAA's continues to be the review, evaluation and approval of quality programs of education and training under State and Federal criteria. SAA's continue to conduct on-site inspection visits to approved institutions and schools seeking approval. The programs that can be approved are found in institutions of higher learning (colleges and universities), non-degree institutions (vocational and technical schools), apprenticeship programs, other on-the-job training programs, and flight training schools. Each State reviews the appropriateness of each program as to its own standards and laws in addition to VA rules and regulations along with any other applicable laws and/or regulations. Then it is either approved or disapproved; continuous supervision is required of approved programs. The following statement is provided to illustrate a school's viewpoint of the approval process for a non-degree institution:

As Director of the Career Learning Center of the Black Hills (CLC), I was approached by Mr. Ken Moon, South Dakota Veteran's Outreach Representative who asked me if I had considered applying to the South Dakota State Approving Agency for approval of our short-term skill training programs as non-degree level courses. Mr. Moon conveyed to me that he believed the CLC training programs may fit the needs of some of the veterans who are in need of skill training, but who are not willing and/or able to commit to a formal post-secondary educational program. Mr. Moon gave me the name and telephone number of the Education Program Specialist from the South Dakota State Approving Agency, Mr. George Summerside, to contact about making application.

From the first conversation I had with Mr. Summerside, I felt confident and assured that any assistance I needed in completing the application would be provided. It was also very evident to me that George had the utmost respect for the process and the requirements for the application and would make certain that all required components of the application would be included in the utmost organized and detailed manner.

My experience in working with the South Dakota State Approving Agency, in preparation of the application for Non-Degree Level Courses was one of high-level professionalism with exemplary technical assistance provided. Mr. Summerside is acutely aware of the requirements for this application and was extremely interested in assisting with inclusion of all the requirements for the application. George looked over numerous drafts of the application and attachments before we submitted the final and completed application for consideration. Since this time, The South Dakota State Approving Agency has provided additional advice and assistance in completing paperwork for VA students of our courses.

There is no question that without the assistance, direction, advice and support of Mr. Summerside, the application process would have been much more difficult and time consuming.

*Gloria Pluimer, Director
Career Learning Center of the Black Hills*

The next statement illustrates a veteran's viewpoint of the approval process for an On-The-Job training program:

I retired from the U.S. Navy in 1993 following 27 years of active service. I had not used any of my GI Bill Education benefits at the time of my retirement. I returned to South Dakota with the intent of going back to school and completing my college education.

I applied for the On-The-Job Training Program in 1994 through the SD Division of Veterans Affairs – State Approving Agency – and was enrolled. I was most appreciative of the professionalism of the person from the State Approving Agency who worked with my employer and me to design a tailored training program. No doubt without the availability of this education benefit, I would not have been able to accept this training position.

Not everyone or every discipline is suited to the traditional classroom style of training and education. The On-The-Job Training Program offers an excellent alternative educational benefit opportunity for those individuals and disciplines. Without this program, it is most probable that my GI Bill Educational Benefits would have gone unused.

*Ron Boyd, State Adjutant
SD American Legion*

PROGRAM SUPERVISION

Our agency conducts annual supervisory visits to each active facility to review the resources and capabilities which are required for continued program approval. The ongoing, on-site monitoring and supervision are vital to ensure these approved institutions continue to provide quality educational programs and meet VA compliance requirements. The following statement illustrates the importance of these visits and supervisory support provided.

“When I took over supervision of USD Veterans’ Services in 2005, our practices needed to be revamped to meet our obligations to the VA and our students. I met with George Summerside, SD State Approving Agency, in June 2005 at a regional training session for which he was one of the main speakers and coordinators. George immediately offered his full support and assistance to the University, and he followed through.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, George was readily available to clarify laws and policies surrounding education benefits. He frequently gave suggestions (sometimes directives) about how The University could meet its obligations, which have improved our services to the students a hundred fold. He provided us a network of other higher education administrators and people employed by the VA who provided invaluable advice.

During the same time period, George visited our campus on three occasions. Two were supervisory visits to help us gauge our progress, and one was to sit on a panel discussion for a Veterans Day event hosted by the USD Veterans Club (a student group). George’s

participation in the Veterans' Day event was widely appreciated by our students and the community, because it demonstrated a positive link to the individuals in Vermillion and the SD Division of Veterans Affairs.

In addition, George was able to provide me much of the information and support I needed to take to my superiors to request the assignment of a full-time employee to USD Veterans' Services. A full-time position was filled in September 2006.

On behalf of the veterans and their dependents attending The University of South Dakota, I can honestly claim that the support of our state approving agency is essential to our success. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement."

*Jenifer Jost, Associate Registrar
The University of South Dakota*

The next statement provides the prospective from Brink Constructors, Inc., an approved training establishment:

First let me say what a pleasure it has been working with the SD State Approving Agency and associated staff. The staff is very knowledgeable and always able to assist us with our questions.

The veterans who join our apprenticeship program are greatly benefited by the financial assistance provided to them through the GI Bill and Apprenticeship Program.

*Robin Cressy-Eddy Judith M. Michael
Human Resource Administrator Apprenticeship Coordinator*

LIAISON

Yet, while the fundamental role of the SAA has remained the same, the SAA's have grown with the changes in our society over the past sixty years. They have become advocates for quality education and training for Veterans and other eligible persons. They have become educational partners with the institutions themselves, facilitating even greater and more diverse educational opportunities for Veterans. They have become strong advocates for the usage of the GI Bill and have developed a working partnership with the Federal government, which other Federal agencies have tried to emulate.

As State and National priorities change, as the function of government undergoes perpetual re-examination, and as the needs of our Veterans evolve with changes in American society, state approving agencies stand ready to meet the challenges before them. In spite of the need for new approaches and technologies, differing styles of oversight and enhanced criteria for performance, the fundamental reasons for which the SAA's were originally created remain as valid today as they were sixty years ago. Mr. Del Johnson, Retired SD Education Liaison Representative (ELR) offers his opinion on State Approving Agencies. Del retired with over 28 years of experience with VA educational services.

In my opinion there is a real value in having a State Approving Agency in each state. Approval of VA educational programs requires extensive knowledge of many complicated laws and regulations. It is absolutely necessary that the local schools and training establishments have someone with whom they can have personal contact. My experience was that there will always

be differences in interpretation and the SAA serves a very important role between the Veterans Administration and the institutions which offer these programs. Now that the Department of Veterans Affairs has become more regionalized we have states that do not have an ELR (Education Liaison Representative) located in the Regional Office in their state, South Dakota is one of those states. This makes the institutions and veterans more isolated from the VA.

The philosophy that "bigger is better" does have its limits and the impact on our smaller states can be negative. There is a need for each state to have a fully staffed SAA so the veterans in that state do not suffer with additional delays in obtaining their educational benefits. These agencies are vital and any reduction in funding would negatively impact VA educational programs.

*Del Johnson
Retired SD ELR*

Our office has developed strong partnerships with many within our veterans' service network and the following comments illustrate these relationships.

The State Approving Agency is a valuable resource for South Dakota's County and Tribal Veteran Service Officers whose job it is to properly serve these veterans.

With the new influx of veterans from the War on Terrorism, it is more important than ever that they are provided with all the benefits they are entitled to, including education.

The State Approving Agency has been there for me on countless occasions to provide quick and highly professional assistance at any time a question arises while initiating an education claim or by personally contacting the St. Louis Regional Processing Center on our behalf when a problem arises during the life of the claim or benefit.

To ever lose or restrict the State Approving Agency, in particular George Summerside or Dr. Tom Murphy, due to federal budget restraints would be a HUGE disservice to South Dakota's veterans.

*Ken Lindblad
Beadle County Veterans Service Officer*

The next statement was submitted by one of our SD Veterans Commissioners.

The SD Veterans Commission relies on select individuals to advise the Commission on veteran related issues and programs. Without the SD State Approving Agency's valuable input our Commission would not be able to make informed decisions on VA educational issues. State Approving Agencies have not only ensured that those eligible for VA educational benefits enroll in quality education and training programs, but they have also served as a champion of veterans educational benefits.

*Bill Locken, Commissioner
SD Veterans Commission*

The following statement provides a viewpoint from Muth Electric Inc., an approved training establishment.

We appreciate the value that the SD State Approving Agency provides to the employees of Muth Electric. Any time there is a benefit that we can offer to our employees, especially those in transition from military to civilian life, we are more than willing to do so. Working with the SD State Approving Agency has allowed our employees an opportunity to utilize their military benefits while learning an exciting and challenging trade.

Amy Tlam
HR Manager

Our agency acts as the state liaison in assisting veterans groups, schools, training establishments, and other service partners with a better understanding of the many VA educational opportunities. By working together we can facilitate even greater and more diverse educational opportunities for those who are eligible for these well deserved and earned benefits.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

This assistance is provided to schools, training establishments, County and Tribal Veterans Service Officers, and individuals on a wide range of VA educational issues and concerns. The information is provided during phone conversations, in emails, during visits and in correspondence. These inquiries are increasing and they require a considerable amount of staff time to be addressed.

The needs of the VA student are and always will be of primary concern to this office. The following statement depicts one student's opinion of our office.

In the past few months George Summerside has been an excellent client advocate. Without his dedication and loyalty the Veterans Education Program would be nothing. Personally I could not have done the nursing program at Western Dakota Technical Institute without him, for he made sure my VA benefits were released to me in enough time to pay my bills, and I did not have to go back to work.

Sincerely,
Samantha Donley

OUTREACH

Our agency is continually developing creative and innovative ways to promote and educate the public on VA educational programs. During FY 2006 our staff developed and distributed over 6,000 brochures/posters to Veterans, guardsmen/reservists, dependents/survivors and other partners within our veterans' service network. Our agency participates in veterans' forums, demob briefings, workshops, and other events whenever our presence can inform or educate the public on the excellent learning opportunities for those eligible for VA educational benefits.

SUMMARY

The core functions that I have discussed today all center around the program approval. *The primary responsibility and focus of the SAA's continue to be the review, evaluation and approval of quality programs of education and training.* Our agencies have sixty years of experience with this process.

Our National Association has developed the National Training Curriculum to serve as a reference and training tool for both new staff and existing agency professionals. This excellent reference guide ensures that staff is trained adequately to perform the comprehensive functions of a State Approving Agency professional. In addition to the National Training Curriculum our association has created the National Training Institute. This Institute provides classroom training for new staff, and both SAA and VA personnel participate. They are held approximately every eighteen months.

If this funding solution is not resolved, there will be a reduction of 32% from the current funding level. South Dakota's contract will be reduced by over \$66, 000 dollars in FY 2008. This will have a negative impact not only on our state but across this nation. The many things that we are doing in outreach and customer service would no longer be possible.

Today you have heard from different agencies and groups; statistical and narrative information has been provided for your review. The testimonies today are not a true measure of our value; our true value rests in the heart of each of the dedicated staff whose sole purpose is the approval of quality programs of education for those eligible for VA educational benefits. Our agencies worth is measured by this dedicated devotion to excellence, and our nation's Veterans deserve no less.

Closing

In closing, Madam Chairwoman, I would like to thank you and members of the Subcommittee again for the opportunity to comment on the functions of the South Dakota State Approving Agency and the value they add in the State of South Dakota. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you might have.